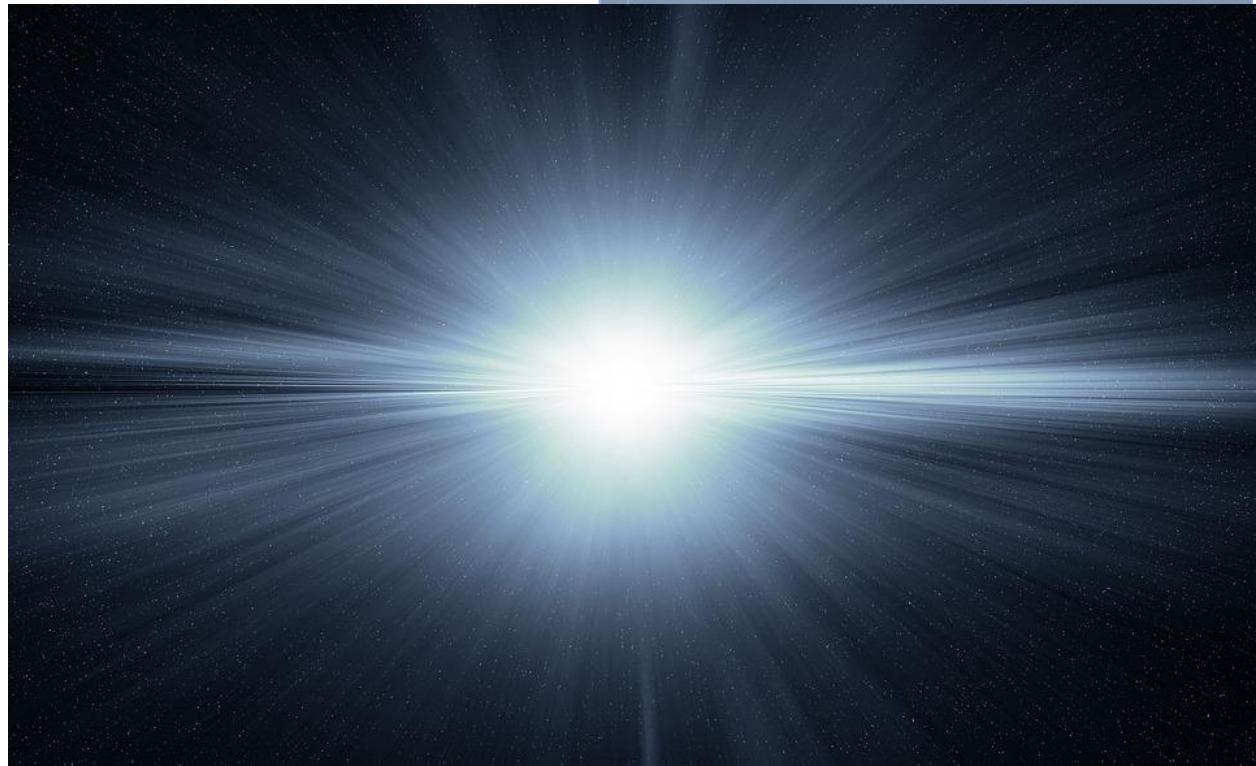


# If God is Sovereign, What About Man's Free Will?



R.C. Sproul

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## Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 50:15-21 ESV)

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*When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.*

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### What led up to this moment

What led up to this moment was one of the most cold-blooded acts of treachery and betrayal. Joseph was the apple of his father's eye and was sold into slavery by his jealous and envious brothers. They took his coat of many colors and dipped it into the blood of an animal, then they returned home and told their father Jacob that a wild animal had killed Joseph. His brothers sold him to a Midianite caravan who then sold him into slavery in Egypt, after which he was bought by Potiphar and then later thrown into prison because of the lies of Potiphar's wife.

He languished in prison year after year, however, he never abandoned his faith in the Lord God. Joseph was eventually freed because of his ability to interpret dreams. He was summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dream, after which Joseph was elevated to the position of prime minister. Joseph built storehouses in preparation for the seven years of drought, and when the drought came, he distributed the grain.

Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain to feed their families. The brothers came into the courts of Pharaoh and met Joseph and did not recognize him, but Joseph recognized them. Finally, after much drama it became clear that the prime minister of Egypt was the brother the brothers had betrayed. After Jacob learned that Joseph was still alive, Joseph brought his whole family to Egypt to live.

### The end of the story

Jacob has died, and the brothers realized that they did not have their father's protection to shield them from the vengeful wrath of their brother Joseph and were terrified. They recognized that Joseph had every right to hate them because what they had done to him was despicable and hateful. They assumed that Joseph would behave the same way toward them by seeking revenge with the same kind of fury they had exercised out of their jealousy and envy against him.

Now the brothers were the ones begging for forgiveness. After they acknowledged that what they had done was evil, Joseph wept. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are

your servants.” (Genesis 50:18 ESV) That foreshadowed the experience of the prodigal son. They came and said, “we have wronged you and don’t expect you to receive us as your brothers, just accept us as your slaves.”

Joseph’s response: But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, **you meant evil** against me, but **God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21 ESV) It was as if Joseph was saying what you did was unspeakable wicked, *you meant it for evil*. But Joseph also understood that the sovereign God of the universe, the Lord God of Israel, was intimately involved in their wickedness. Joseph knew that his brothers could not have hurt him for a second, they couldn’t have damaged his heart or his relationship with his father, and they couldn’t have delivered him into the hands of his enemies and cast into prison apart from the sovereign providence of God. Joseph believed in a God who works all things together for good. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

Joseph was in no way letting his brothers off the hook, reminding them that they meant evil, but God meant it for good. God’s intent in this was altogether righteous, and God in His sovereignty has the capacity and the ability to work through the sinful decisions and the wicked choices of His creatures to bring about His sovereign will, which is altogether righteous.

This is shown in the New Testament: *this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.* (Acts 2:23-24 ESV) The cross was not an accident. The cross was the most wicked evil ever perpetrated by human beings. Caiaphas meant it for evil. Pilot meant it for evil. The Pharisees meant it for evil, but over and above the human decisions that grew out of the evil inclinations and impulses of fallen human being, God was at work to bring about good. God meant it for good in order *that many people should be kept alive*.

## Moses

There arose a new Pharaoh that did not know Joseph and now Israel was enslaved. Despite their slavery, the Israelites multiplied greatly which in turn caused Pharaoh to order the male babies to be killed. Moses’ sister, Miriam, made an ark for Moses and floats it in the Nile river. The daughter of Pharaoh came to the river and heard a baby crying, so she took the baby (Moses) home and raised him as the child of Pharaoh’s daughter.

One day Moses defended an Israelite and accidentally kills an Egyptian and was banished into exile where he languished in the Midianite desert until his old age. God appeared in the desert to Moses in a burning bush and gave Moses a mandate: God spoke to Moses telling him to say to Pharaoh “I have heard the cry of my people, let my people go.” And what follows is the greatest redemptive event in the whole Old Testament, the Exodus.

God entered into a covenant with Israel. God made them a nation, He gave them His Law, conquered a land, gave them a king, sent them prophets, and a couple of thousand years later the Messiah was born a baby in Bethlehem. All of this because of a coat of many colors. No coat, no jealousy. No jealousy, no betrayal. No betrayal, no sale into slavery. No trip into Egypt, no Potiphar. No Potiphar, no Potiphar’s

wife. No jail, no Pharaoh, and no settling in the land of Goshen.

Never slavery, never an Exodus, never a nation, never the Law, never the kingdom of God. Joseph's words resound throughout history; "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good to save many people."

### How Do We Reconcile the Sovereignty of God with Human Freedom?

Some offer false explanations like: It is like parallel lines (God's sovereignty and Man's freedom) that meet in eternity. Then, obviously, if the lines meet, they are not parallel.

This is really a very simple question. Man has a will and can make choices. God is a being and man is a being. Man is a human being and God is the Supreme Being. It is important to understand which one is supreme. Man is not the supreme being, God is. God is a volitional being, that is, God has a will. He has a faculty by which He makes decisions and choices. Humans are also volitional beings, and part of our humanity is that our Creator has endowed us with the faculty of choosing which we call the will. We have the ability to make choices.

Man, however, is not a truly free being. Edmond Hatherall's (founder of Personalism) view of personhood: What defines human beings as persons is that humans have the ability to act with intentionality. Humans can conceive of a purpose and make decisions and choices to bring that idea to pass. Jean-Paul Sartre, a Hatherall disciple, who are atheists concluded that: Human freedom is the greatest argument there is against the existence of God. If man is truly free, God cannot exist. And if God exists, man cannot be free.

Man, then is not an autonomous being? Sartre believed that freedom means autonomy, and unless your freedom is elevated to autonomy, your freedom is a mirage. What is autonomy? *Auto* means self and *Nomos* means law. Therefore, autonomy means *self-law* or *self-rule*. So according to Sartre, having true autonomy means to have no accountability to anyone outside yourself. If I rule myself there is no room for a sovereign omnipotent deity who reigns in heaven over all things. If you want to find an unsolvable contradiction it is the conflict between divine and human autonomy. Those two cannot mutually exist in the same universe.

Nowhere does the Bible teach that human beings have been given autonomy by God. On the contrary! Autonomy is the illegitimate, illicit reach of creatures made in submission to a sovereign God. In creation, God said, you may freely eat of every tree in the Garden. There are limits to man's freedom. You may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of that tree, you will die. God gave man was the ability to make choices, but that ability was not unlimited; it was a limited freedom!

There are dangerous principles taught in some churches today. Some teach that God's sovereignty is limited by man's freedom. According to this concept, God wants to save as many people as He can. He wants to save everybody, and He does the best He can, but if He would work in your heart without your permission, He would be violating your freedom; so, God can't save you unless you want to be saved. God then, doesn't destroy our freedom, He elevates it. The reality is that were we not free at all, since the Bible clearly teaches that before salvation, we are slaves to our own wicked inclinations.

The doctrine of concurrence states that there can be the choices of God at the same time there are choices of men and that our freedom never places a limit on God. We must get rid of the pagan ideas that have infiltrated the church, like that free will means autonomy, or that as a creature you have the

ability to incline yourself to the good or to the bad with equal power. God says that in his nature man is a slave, he still has a will and the ability to make choices, but his choices are wicked. Man is morally incapable, in and of himself, until he is enabled by God the Holy Spirit to choose the holy things of God.

God has the wisdom and desire to work through our desires to bring about His plan even if or when our desires are altogether evil. God can and does work through our evil desire to bring about His good purposes: *You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good*. The important thing is to remember who is sovereign and who isn't, and this then will never be a problem for you.